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The Winds House: Reintegration and Renewal

Comprehensive studio was by far the most challenging studio to date, but it was also the most rewarding. It was rewarding not in the fact that we accomplished so much in one semester (although that was certainly a bonus). It was rewarding in that for the first time, I felt like I was designing something that could truly make a difference in people's lives. I've enjoyed designing aquariums and art houses, light fixtures and conceptual bridges, but they all just felt like "fun" projects. The opportunity to help people is why I got into architecture in the first place, and this semester I actually saw that goal realized. Granted, it was just a project that I designed and not one that will be built, but the point is that it actually *could* be built. And if it were, I only hope that it would help its inhabitants in all the ways I envision it would; that it would be a place of healing, and ultimately, of regeneration.

Our task this semester was to design a facility for the Winds House of Oklahoma City. The Winds House is a transitional housing program for people with HIV and AIDS. Currently, this is an overlooked and underserved community; there are many people in OKC living with this condition and some of them are homeless because of it. Currently, the Winds House owns and operates two houses in the Oklahoma City Area. They are both moderately sized homes, each capable of housing several occupants. One house was just refurbished, while the other is currently undergoing the renovation process. Our client, Colin, is in charge of overseeing those

two houses. It was obvious upon first meeting him how passionate he is for this cause and how much he cares for his clients. The Winds House does not currently have the funds to build a permanent housing facility, but it is a dream of the organization's and of Colin's specifically. As I did not know much about the HIV/ AIDS community initially, or the day to day problems that they face, our meeting with Colin was incredibly insightful. I learned that having AIDS used to be a death sentence, but now there are ways of treating it (but those treatments must be administered every day). I also learned that for some, contracting HIV or AIDS inevitably leads to social isolation and homelessness. I learned that, according to Colin (who knows these people on a personal level), the thing that his clients want most is a sense of normalcy and belonging. He stressed that had they their top choice in living situations, almost all would prefer to live in a regular house, in a regular neighborhood. Most importantly, they want to be treated like regular people. These basic desires played a significant role in my design concept, as well as throughout the design process as a whole.

I began the design process with a substantial amount of research. Because this was a project so obviously focused on the building's occupants, I wanted to know as much about said occupants as possible (or at least people in the same situations). I read story after story about people who have dealt with afflictions such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, or alcoholism. All of these people ended up on the street, and all of them were eventually reintegrated into society through the aid of transitional housing. As I read, I noticed some common denominators among the people I was researching. All of them seemed to have five basic needs, needs that had to be fulfilled along the path to reintegration. These needs were a place to live, physical healing, emotional healing, social interaction, and life/ job skills. I initially saw these steps as

occurring in a linear cycle, one that ultimately led to reintegration and then repeated itself as those who had reintegrated turned to lend a hand to those in the same situations they had just come out of. However, the more reading that I did the more I realized that the healing process was not the same for every person. While most of them did require some combination of these steps, many went in a different order, backtracked to a previous step, or skipped one altogether. Ultimately, the common factor in these success stories was that each individual had immediate access to all steps of the healing process, and could easily transition from one to the next. Thus, the driving factor in our team's design was a central transition space that connected the five stages.

Our project site was a parking lot on the corner of 11th and Robinson near downtown OKC. It was a prime location for this facility; it was close to downtown without being right in the middle of a public area, was immediately adjacent to a bus stop, and was situated among several local churches (whose members would hopefully become volunteers at the Winds House). We chose to locate our central transition space on axis with 11th street, so that people approaching the site could get a glimpse into the facility. The transition space itself was an open courtyard. We did this for several reasons, the primary one being that nature plays a significant role in emotional and even physical healing. Thus, we made as many of our transitional spaces as we could exterior. We decided early on that the most important moments in our project, the points of transition and interaction, would be outside. These spaces would be marked not only by architectural elements, but by material changes as well. Our group talked a lot about how different materials could be used to signify transitional

spaces, and how different materials are experienced in various ways: the crunch of gravel underfoot, the sound of wind through the trees, or the smell of a bed of flowers.

Another important idea we drew from our discussion with Colin was the necessity to keep things at a familiar scale. Because he stressed how much his clients would appreciate a sense of normalcy, we translated that into a building that was distinctly human in scale. The starting point for achieving this goal was working with a twelve-foot square base grid, both on the horizontal plane as well as the vertical one. One of the most notable ways in which we articulated this human scale was with the form and façade of the building. Because the site is relatively small, it was necessary to design a building that was multiple stories tall. Our group limited ourselves to three stories, and we also made sure to keep each story, and in fact each unit, distinct. We did this by staggering the family units as well as the single residence occupancies, so that each inhabitant would have a "front porch" of sorts as well as a balcony in the back. This arrangement of the residencies was critical to the design of our building, as it helped achieve another goal of our concept: varying levels of social interaction.

Because the residents of the Winds House would have been through so much already (living on the streets in plain view of any passerby), it was imperative to provide them with the privacy that they needed. On the other hand, that privacy had to be balanced with a certain amount of social interaction. One woman I researched pointed out that while she was elated to finally have a place to call her own, a place that was entirely hers, she also struggled with depression that stemmed from being alone for so much of the day. So, our design concept included a goal to provide varying levels of privacy within the site coupled with moments of social interaction. On the most basic level, this started with the SROs themselves. The highest

level of privacy occurs in the residencies, with an increasing level of social interaction as one moves away from his or her individual home. The next steps beyond the residency are the front porch and the balcony, both of which are shared by just a few inhabitants and encourage close relationships with next door neighbors. As a resident moves out and away from his home, he encounters more people and opportunities for communication. These opportunities culminate in the most public spaces on the ground floor, such as the recreational center, where at certain times the surrounding community is invited to interact with and engage the Winds House residents.

With these key goals and ideas in mind, our group continued headlong into the design process. Each member of the group tackled different aspects of the design, but we tried to make sure that we periodically exchanged tasks so that no one person would have done a portion of the project alone; this way, there was always a fresh set of eyes offering a new perspective and differing opinion on any given portion of the project. We kept track of our tasks using something called a scrum chart. Each team member had a certain color of sticky note that he would write his week's tasks on, one task per note. These sticky notes were then placed onto a whiteboard that separated the tasks into three columns: assigned, in progress, and complete. Our group did not always do the best at keeping up with the chart, but when we did it proved very helpful. The chart helped us to check that responsibilities were evenly distributed, and that everyone was making steady progress throughout the week. During the initial stages of schematic design, we all worked on similar tasks. For instance, each person would come up with a concept and then we would confer and pull the best ideas from each, or we would each come up with three overall building forms and then hash through the pros and

cons of each option. In general, we organized the spaces of our facility according to the aforementioned five steps of the healing process, and in what ways those steps should relate to one another.

Once we got past the initial research and conceptual planning, we each began to work on our separate assignments. During this portion of the schematic design phase, I focused primarily on the overall image of the building, as well as the specific layouts of the family units and the SROs. I worked through many iterations of residency arrangements, in an attempt to find a solution that was practical and efficient while also meeting our conceptual goals. The best answer to this question turned out to be a staggered arrangement of homes- two adjacent SROs were pushed back, and the next two pushed forward. This pattern was then repeated on the next floor up, but began at a different spot in order to create unique vertical outdoor spaces that were accessible to a small number of residents each. For the front side of the SROs, this solution made it possible for inhabitants to share multiple "front porch" areas; each unit would not be accessed directly off of a hallway (as is the case with most housing complexes) but instead would be approached via a small, open green area: a place where residents could pause for a moment on a nice day or exchange stories with their immediate neighbors.

As for the building's overall image, there were several key factors that drove the design. Although functional requirements meant that the building had to be three stories tall, it was vital to break down the façade to a human scale. This was achieved to some extent through the overall form of the building (the staggered units played a large role), but that only brought the scale down to a 12' square grid. The grid could be further reduced through the use of certain materials. First, I explored façade material options through the employment of quick sketches

and traces. Our group quickly agreed that a paneled façade would make the most sense with our concept and scale. Those panels would ideally be broken down further by separation into smaller linear or paneled elements. This led us to some initial material exploration. The most notable material we chose to explore for the exterior façade was a terracotta baguette system. These baguettes typically come in four-foot lengths, which worked nicely with our twelve-foot grid. The terracotta's color and texture would tie into the surrounding brick of downtown OKC, while its linear nature would offer varying levels of privacy and screening. We also looked into a wood louvre system, but concluded that wood would not be a practical exterior material given the local climate.

After schematic design came the design development phase. During this phase my primary focuses were the refinement of the material palette, the detailing of a wall section, and the development of a specific interior space. These design-based tasks were supplemented and enhanced by calculations in daylighting, structure, and HVAC. For my materials, I chose to stick with the same palette we began during SD. I explored other material options, but found that our initial solution actually worked best with my concept and solved the most design issues. The main change that I made was to refine the pattern and attachment system of the terracotta baguettes; three different types of four-foot square baguette panels could be used to achieve the desired screening and aesthetic qualities. The types of panels varied in spacing of the baguettes themselves, and therefore in overall density.

I actually enjoyed designing a wall section a lot more than I thought I would. It was interesting to see how conceptual and aesthetic considerations could still play a role in such a specific detail. I took a wall section that cut through my lounge space, second floor exterior

balcony, and a third-floor family bedroom. I chose this section partially because it was in my focus space, but also because it cut through a variety of spaces and finding the solution to this one wall section would solve a number of problems elsewhere. The wall section allowed me to detail exactly how the baguette system would tie into the building's structure. It also helped enormously in the placement of ceiling panels, HVAC, and other elements. My concept was most notably iterated in the wall section through the lowered ceiling panels; again, I wanted to keep the space at a distinctly human scale. In the creation of my wall section I also chose to pull my structure in and expose it more, which spoke to the simplicity and truth of our healing concept.

The design of the interior space was my favorite part of the design development phase, as our studios have never focused much on interiors before. I chose to design my lounge space for several reasons. First, it is somewhat of a transitional space, and transition plays such a key role in our concept (a couple of classrooms, a teaching kitchen, and the main entry all branch off of the lounge). At the same time, it is a space not only of transition but of other functional purposes: the lounge is a place where residents can engage in conversation, play games, or simply relax and watch television together. I also chose the lounge space because of its location along an axis that runs through the lounge, reception area, main entry, and the recreation space entrance. Lastly, I chose it for its potential concerning HVAC and lighting calculations.

The interior material palette coincided with that of the exterior. Two-foot Armstrong ceiling panels tie into the overall grid, while their linear texture speaks to the terracotta baguettes. The floor treatment is a brown carpet with an earthy, natural pattern; the carpet is

a familiar material, while its color and texture are more natural than other carpets. The lounge furniture consists of square, modular pieces that can be easily moved and reconfigured. This gives the residents some control over their lounge space, which in turn gives them a sense of ownership and belonging. It also means that the furniture can easily be rearranged to form different sizes of conversational spaces, depending on the desires of the user. The lounge has a curtain wall facing west; however, much of the direct sunlight is blocked by the trellis system along the west façade or is filtered through the line of trees and other greenery. This immediately adjacent green space visually blends with the lounge, and outdoor furniture is employed to create the feeling of one large space. This integration of nature and filtered daylight into the lounge does a lot for the space's healing properties. During most days, the lounge receives enough natural light to illuminate the space singlehandedly. For times when more light is required, there are recessed LED linear lights located in between the ceiling panels. Task lighting hangs over the reception desk, and a series of small spotlights illuminate the donor wall behind it.

For my detail design, I chose to further explore the construction of my donor wall. An organization such as the Winds House relies almost entirely on its donors, so it is important to commemorate those who volunteer their time and money. The donor wall is located in the lounge area, behind the front reception desk. There were several reasons for this location: first of all, the wall is on an axis with the reception desk, the front doors of the lounge space, and doors into the recreation center across the courtyard. Thus, the wall provides a focal point that can be viewed from multiple spaces. The wall itself consists of glass panels suspended from a ceiling-mounted cable system. The donor wall's transparency and location allow it to become

an interactive partition rather than a static one; people, light, and shadows are all visible through the wall to varying degrees during different times of day. This was one of the most important aspects of the wall. As the viewer observes it, he can see not only the names of the donors, but also the tangible products of their generosity. The residents enjoying the lounge space behind the wall are living proof of what a difference a Winds House donor can make. The panels on the donor wall may also include names of those who have lived at the Winds House and moved on, completing the path of reintegration back into society. These panels would provide inspiration to current residents going through that journey themselves.

The wall is oriented north to south, partially to act as a partition between the lounge and the front desk but also to capture and filter direct morning and evening sunlight. The panels are frosted colored glass with names etched into each. The panels come in a variety of natural colors (blues, greens, and yellows) to tie back to the concept of healing through nature. The individual colors could be used to signify different types of names, such as donors versus past Winds House residents. The panels are eight inches square, further breaking down the original twelve-foot grid. Each panel is the same size because each donor is equally as important, regardless of how much he or she has contributed. The panels are hung from cables using edge grip cable clamps, so that panels can easily be added or modified. The wall itself has no hard edges, only cables; thus, it blends almost seamlessly into the residential space behind it. It also has no top edge; the cables simply extend into a slot between the ceiling panels. This signifies the endless need for donors, but also the limitless possibilities for everyone who stays at the Winds House.

The Winds House was easily my favorite project to date. It was the most practical building I have designed, which I initially assumed meant it would also be the least fun. However, I was proven wrong. The specific design challenges that were presented during this studio actually made the design process more enjoyable, as new problems always require more thought and creativity. I take pride in the fact that our team's initial design and my final building were driven entirely by the needs of the client, and by the concept we came up with to address those needs. In my other projects, the design goals have sometimes gotten lost or muddled partway through the process, but such was not the case this semester. I really feel like my group and I did our best to design a building that, if constructed, would play a vital role in the reintegration of those with HIV and AIDS back into society.